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ABSTRACT

Key characteristics of adults who took the General Educational Development (GED) Tests in 1989 were compared with those of their 1980 counterparts. Findings indicated that the percentage taking the tests primarily to fulfill postsecondary educational admissions requirements increased from 29.1 to 32.8 percent. The percentage who took the tests for employment reasons declined from 38.6 to 32.2 percent. A higher percentage reported studying before taking the tests, an increase from 79.5 to 83.8 percent. The average number of hours studied increased from 20.0 to 30.5. Candidates in 1989 reported having the same in-school grades and years of schooling as those in 1980. The number of candidates aged 18 to 24 declined by 26 percent. The proportion of Hispanics increased from 6.8 to 11.2 percent, whereas the percentage of Black candidates fell from 17.1 to 14.2 percent. Minority adults continued to be more highly represented among GED candidates than in the general U.S. population. The largest percentage of candidates in both years cited personal reasons for leaving high school. The percentage who left school due to pregnancy or marriage tripled. Nearly one in five cited the need to work as the most important reason for leaving school. The percentage who left school because they were not doing well declined. (12 references) (YLB)

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GED Profiles: Adults in Transition

GED TESTING SERVICE OF THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EDUCATION • SEPTEMBER 1990 • NO. 1

GED Candidates: A Decade of Change

by Janet Baldwin

This first report in the **GED Profiles: Adults in Transition** *series compares key characteristics of adults who took the General Educational Development (GED) Tests in 1989 with those of their 1980 counterparts. It describes changes in reasons for taking the GED Tests, patterns of study for the GED Tests, grades while in school, highest grade attended, ethnicity and race, age, and reasons for dropping out of high school.*

What are the GED Tests and who takes them?

The General Educational Development (GED) Tests measure the major and lasting outcomes of a 4-year high school program of study. The content of the tests corresponds to what graduating high school seniors are expected to know in writing skills, social studies, science, literature and the arts, and mathematics. Each year, nearly 700,000 people take the GED Tests. In 1989, more than 375,000 candidates passed the GED Tests.

By passing the GED Tests, adults earn high school diplomas and qualify for college enrollment, training programs, jobs, and job advancement. To qualify for a diploma, adults taking the GED Tests must surpass the performance of about 30% of a national sample of graduating high school seniors. One of every six high school diplomas awarded in the U.S. each year is based on the GED Tests.

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KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

- About 200,000 adults, or 33% of candidates in 1989, took the GED Tests primarily to meet educational admissions requirements. GED candidates represent a major source of new college students each year. **College admissions officers and academic and career counselors should target outreach and recruitment activities to GED candidates.**

- Candidates' reported study time has increased 50%. Also, evidence of waiting lists for adult education programs suggests that programs may not be available in sufficient quantities for all adults who want to enroll in classes. **Educational program planners may need to expand the duration and number of GED instructional programs.**

- The 26% decline in the number of 18- to 24-year-olds taking the GED Tests represents a serious threat to dropout recovery efforts. Less than 1.3% of White, Black, and Hispanic adults over the age of 18 who lacked a high school diploma took the GED Tests in 1989, indicating the need for more effective outreach to these groups. **Federal, state, and local government policy makers, employers, and educators should seek ways to increase access to adult programs for high school completion and to expand the availability of such programs to underserved groups.**

- The percentage of GED candidates who report having dropped out of school due to pregnancy or marriage has tripled. Helping parents to complete high school may improve the educational prospects for children. **Educational program planners should seek ways to provide child care or other family support services for candidates.**

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Motivations for Taking the GED Tests Change

The most important reasons candidates gave for taking the GED Tests changed in some ways: *(Figure 1)*:

- **The percentage of candidates taking the GED Tests primarily to fulfill postsecondary educational admissions requirements increased from 29.1% in 1980 to 32.8% in 1989.**
- **The percentage of candidates who took the GED Tests for employment reasons declined from 38.6% in 1980 to 32.2% in 1989.**
- **About one in four candidates in 1980 (24.9%) and more than one in five in 1989 (21.5%) cited personal satisfaction as the primary reason for taking the GED Tests.**

Candidates were more likely to take the GED Tests for educational reasons in 1989 than in 1980. For an estimated 200,000 adults in 1989, the GED Tests provided the chance to qualify for higher education programs. The increase in the percentage of candidates planning to enroll in colleges or universities, vocational training, and other postsecondary education programs may reflect candidates' recognition that higher education can lead to greater financial security and job advancement.

Although the motivations of GED candidates may be based less on employment goals than in the past, for nearly 200,000 adults in 1989, the GED Tests represented an avenue to employment opportunity and job advancement.

Candidates Study Longer

A higher percentage of 1989 candidates than of 1980 candidates reported studying before taking the GED Tests. Those who studied tended to study longer. Candidates in 1989 reported having the same in-school grades and years of schooling as those in 1980.

- **The percentage of candidates who reported studying for the GED Tests increased from 79.5% to 83.8%.**
- **The average number of hours adults reported having studied for the GED Tests increased from 20.0 in 1980 to 30.5 in 1989, an increase of 50%.**
- **The percentage of candidates who reported studying over 100 hours more than doubled, from 11.8% in 1980 to 24.2% in 1989.**
- **Nearly seven in ten candidates in 1980 (68.5%) and in 1989 (69.9%) reported having completed 10th grade or higher before leaving high school. More than one in three candidates (36.9% in 1980 and 38.6% in 1989) reported having completed 11th grade or higher.**
- **About three of every four candidates reported having grades while in school of "mostly C or better" in both 1980 (76.8%) and 1989 (74.0%). More than one in five candidates reported in-school grades of "mostly B or better" in 1980 (23.2%) and 1989 (21.5%).**

Why has reported study time increased? One likely reason is that the GED Tests were upgraded in 1988 to include greater emphasis on writing and higher order thinking skills. Candidates may have perceived the new tests as more difficult than previous GED Tests and thus believed they needed more study to improve their skills.

Candidates reported similar in-school grades and highest grade completed in 1980 and 1989, suggesting that the levels of schooling in both years were roughly equivalent. Therefore, it seems unlikely that the increase in study time is due to poorer academic skills of candidates. However, further research is needed to examine these issues more directly.

The ways candidates studied for the GED Tests in both 1980 and 1989 included attending classes or learning centers, working with tutors, taking the Official GED Practice Tests, studying from a book or manual, watching televised GED programs, and other methods. Regardless of the method selected, the overall trend is toward longer periods of study before taking the GED Tests. The increases in the percentage of candidates studying and in the amount of time spent studying raise questions of whether classes, programs, and resources are available in sufficient quantities for all adults who want to study for the GED Tests. Indeed, there is evidence that many basic skills programs for adults have waiting lists and have turned away potential learners.

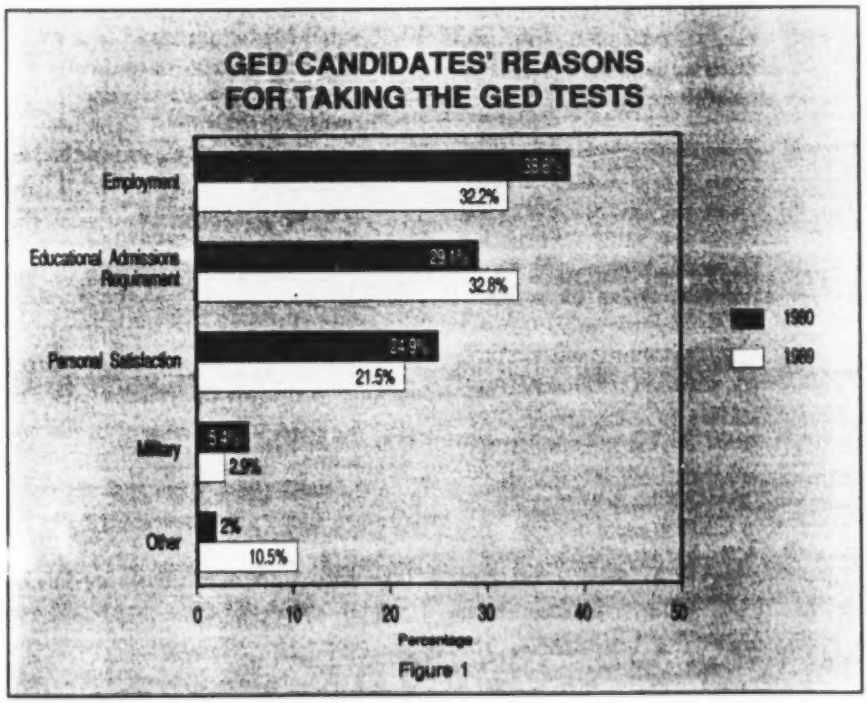
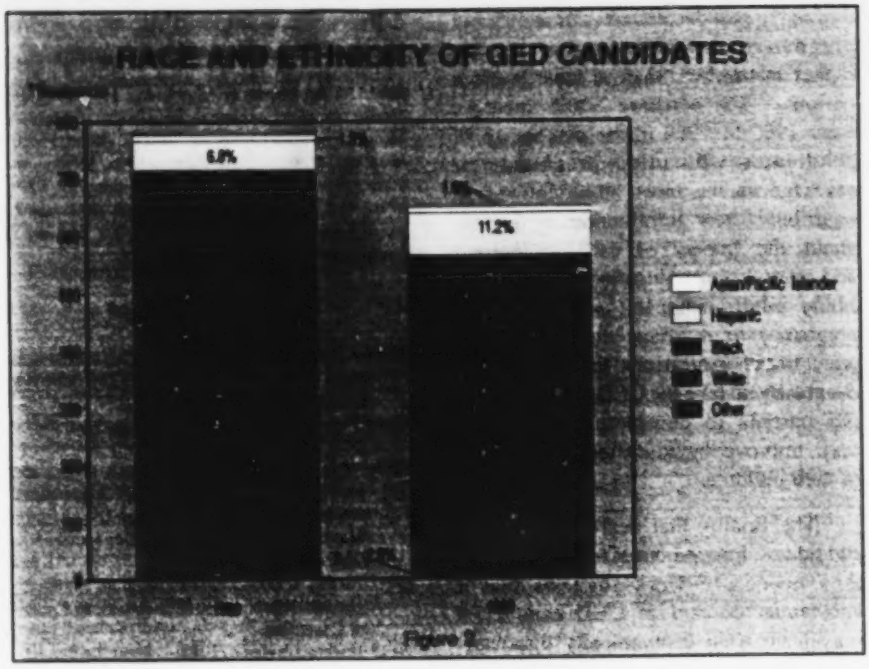


Figure 1



GED Demographics Reflect Change

The size and composition of the GED candidate population changed in the past decade *(Figure 2)*:

- **Adults between the ages of 18 and 24 accounted for about 50% of GED candidates in 1980 and 1989. However, the number of candidates aged 18 to 24 declined by 26%.**
- **The composition of minority GED candidates changed. The proportion of Hispanic candidates increased from 6.8% in 1980 to 11.2% in 1989, while the percentage of Black candidates fell from 17.1% in 1980 to 14.2% in 1989.**
- **Minority adults continued to be more highly represented among GED candidates (about 29.5% in both 1980 and 1989) than in the general U.S. population of adults 18 and older (18.2% in 1980 and 21.2% in 1988).**
- **The proportions of White GED candidates (about 70.5%) and minority GED candidates (about 29.5%) remained the same.**

The 26% decline in the number of 18- to 24-year-old GED candidates from 1980 to 1989 raises serious concerns about the future education and employment opportunities of young adult nongraduates. Only about half of this decline may be due to the 12.5% decline in the size of the U.S. population of 18- to 24-year-olds during this period. Another factor may be that young people are choosing to work rather than complete their schooling.

If young people are choosing to work rather than complete their schooling, the price may be high for both individuals and society--individuals lose opportunities for additional training, advanced education, better jobs, and higher wages, while society loses the increased productivity of better educated, more highly skilled workers. In order to qualify for training, further education, jobs, and higher earnings, these adults must have opportunities to earn high school diplomas.

Hispanics represent the most undereducated major subgroup in the nation. The increase in the percentage of Hispanic GED candidates during the past decade represents a 34.4% increase in the estimated number of Hispanics taking the GED Tests. Although this increase is a promising sign of educational advancement for this group, in 1987 more than 44% of Hispanics aged 18 to 24 (nearly 1.2 million) and nearly half of Hispanics over the age of 25 (4.6 million) lacked high school diplomas. The total number of Hispanics taking the GED Tests in 1989 represented only about 1.1% of all Hispanic adults over the age of 18 who lacked high school diplomas.

Some of the decline in the percentage of Black GED candidates may be due to improvements in the high school graduation rate for Blacks. Nevertheless, more than 35% of Blacks over the age of 18 (6.8 million) lacked high school diplomas in 1987. Of this group, more than one million were between the ages of 18 and 24.

Because Whites represent the largest segment of the U.S. adult population without high school diplomas, it is not surprising that this group represents the largest racial group among GED candidates. In 1987, 34.3 million Whites over the age of 18 lacked high school diplomas; of this group, 4.6 million were between the ages of 18 and 24. More than 42 million White, Black, and Hispanic adults over the age of 18 lacked high school diplomas in 1987. Of these groups, less than 1.3% took the GED Tests in 1989.

Sources of Information for GED Profiles: Adults in Transition

In 1980, the GED Testing Service conducted a national survey of persons taking the English-language version of the GED Tests. A subsequent survey was conducted in 1989 to learn how GED candidates had changed and to provide an in-depth profile of candidates' attitudes, experiences, backgrounds, and goals. In 1989, the GED Testing Service also analyzed the recent test achievement of GED examinees and graduating high school seniors. The GED Profiles: Adults in Transition series is based on data from these studies and from statistical reports published in 1980 and in 1989. Technical documentation for the series is provided in GED Profiles: Technical Summaries, which contains descriptions of samples, instruments, and procedures, as well as tables of candidate responses to questions from the 1980 and 1989 candidate surveys. This document is available from the GED Testing Service.

Why Did They Drop Out?

During the past decade, there were both similarities and differences in the most important reason candidates cited for leaving high school *(Figure 3)*.

- **The largest percentage of candidates in both 1980 (40.8%) and 1989 (34.7%) cited personal reasons as the most important.**
- **The percentage of GED candidates who reported having left school due to pregnancy or marriage tripled. In 1989, one in five adults taking the GED Tests (19.7%) cited this reason as the most important. Of these, about nine in ten are women.**
- **Nearly one in five candidates cited the need to work to support themselves and others as the most important reason for leaving school (18.7% in both 1980 and 1989).**
- **The percentage of candidates who reported that they left school because they were not doing well in classes declined from 13.1% in 1980 to 6.4% in 1989.**

The high percentage of candidates who dropped out of school for personal reasons raises questions about students' adjustment to home and school. Although teenage pregnancy rates in the U.S. leveled off during the past decade, rates of adolescent pregnancy and childbearing remain higher in the U.S. than in most western nations. The startling 300% increase from 1980 to 1989 in the percentage of candidates who cited pregnancy or marriage as the most important reason contributes new information to debates about the impact of early pregnancy and marriage on educational attainment. Many adults who left school due to pregnancy or marriage do indeed have educational aspirations that lead them eventually to take the GED Tests. Helping parents to complete high school may improve the educational prospects of their children.

The finding that nearly one in five candidates dropped out of school because they needed to work suggests that a substantial portion of GED candidates may have been economically disadvantaged when they left school.

Only 6.4% of 1989 GED candidates reported that they left school because they were not doing well in classes, a 51% decline from 1980. This finding suggests that academic difficulty plays not only a declining role in candidates' decisions to drop out of high school, but also a relatively minor one.

* * *

Because reasons for taking the GED Tests may vary by the ages of the candidates, subsequent reports will address differences in candidates' motivations, interests, and attitudes by age group.

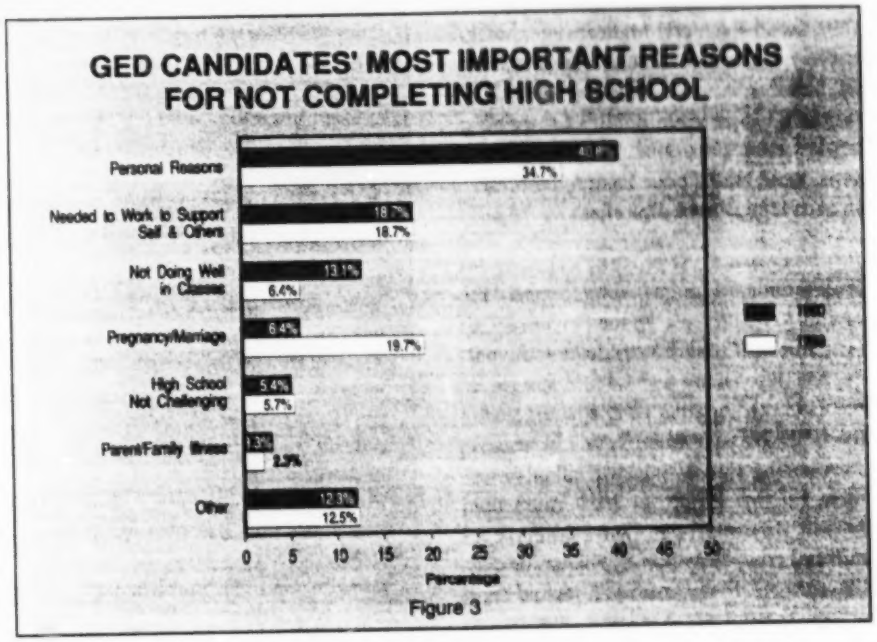


Figure 3

Note: Hispanics may be of any race. Hispanic GED candidates were excluded from racial categories. Minority includes Hispanic, Black, Asian, Pacific Islander, Alaskan Native, American Indian, and other. The percentages given for minority adults in the U.S. population in 1980 and 1988 may be inflated because some Hispanics were counted in more than one category.

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GED Profiles: Adults in Transition is a series of policy-relevant reports based on an important segment of the adult learner population: persons who take the GED Tests. Published by the GED Testing Service of the American Council on Education (ACE), the series is available for $6.5 from ACE, Publications Dept. PAT, One Dupont Circle, Washington, D.C. 20036.